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Kevin Riordan: Hair is a family affair at Marlton salon



By Kevin Riordan
Inquirer Columnist

People around here are serious about hair (see: *Jerseylicious*).

As is true in the central New Jersey milieu of that "reality" TV show, getting a new 'do can be a theatrical experience in South Jersey, too. A salon in the 856 or 609 area code can offer *Jerseylicious*-style mash-ups between melodramas and musicals.

But at Moxie Blue, "we're a no-drama zone," Licha McLennan says, standing amid the buzzy hum of the Marlton salon she owns with her husband, Danny. "*Jerseylicious* doesn't do our profession any good. People on there look like they're going to explode."

Perhaps it's all that hair spray at the show's Gatsby Salon in Green Brook, Somerset County.

Or perhaps the contrast stems from the fact that styling is a family affair at Moxie: Danny and Licha met 16 years ago at a hair show in Hawaii, got married, and raised his two sons and her one from their previous marriages.

All five now work together at Moxie, where Dan McLennan, 25, handles marketing, and Corey McLennan, 23, is a stylist, as is their brother Johnny Serrano, 22.

"They're following in my footsteps, and I got a little bit of [stylistic] flair from my own mother, who was an artist," explains Danny, 51.

He and a fellow athlete at Roxborough High School in Philadelphia decided to apply to beauty school on a lark. "We wanted to meet girls," Danny says.

A bit shy - as a child, he overcame stuttering - he nevertheless took to the hair business right away.

So did Licha, 45, who used to cut hair in the girls' room at her California middle school. "I did my first wedding party when I was in high school, and I won a scholarship to beauty school," she recalls. "Back when all the big feathers [of the '80s] were in."

The couple opened Moxie Blue in what had been a bikini boutique on a well-heeled stretch of Route 73 in 2008. They wanted their salon to be glam, yet down-to-earth; upscale, but family-friendly.

Which may explain all the kids and teens who are getting haircuts on the day I visit.

"This is a chill place," says Austin Lees, a 15-year-old Cherokee High School freshman.

"It's a happy place," Licha observes.

Seems to be: A tasteful mix of up-tempo music bumps in the background, and videos flash and flicker. Everyone's chatting as the stylists wield blow dryers suspended from the ceiling.

But Moxie Blue is also a lot of work. "Seven-day weeks and probably eight-day weeks," Danny says.

He shows me the color bar. "I mix, just like a bartender," he explains. "It's not just about squirting color from a tube."

Careful calculation and creativity contribute to what he calls the salon "experience." Which, needless to say, involves more than mere hair: Pedicures, manicures and more are on the menu.

When the couple started in the business two decades ago, nearby foot traffic, as well as word-of-mouth, were key to attracting customers. People now search for salons online, and they have higher expectations. They want a certain atmosphere and a certain amount of energy, if not entertainment.

They want toasty warm towels "and all the amenities," the younger Dan says.

"Branding is very important," his father adds, pointing out the cheery orange chairs.

Which very soon will be filled with dozens, if not hundreds, of young women eager for a sensational look on the eve of a prom or a wedding.

"It's going to be nuts," Licha says. "We're in the middle of five big high schools. The girls start booking appointments in September. Then they worry about the dress."

Changes in fashion and new hair "technology" notwithstanding, Moxie Blue - where two generations of one family work side-by-side - embodies an old story.

"This is our piece of the American dream," Danny says. "That's what it is."

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